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ABSTRACT

Today's communications systems and technology facilitate the erosion of cultural differences, threatening cultural sovereignty. In the fifteenth century, the first information revolution created the concept of the nation-state with its unique cultural identity. The technology of the second information revolution, which has advanced video broadcasting and computer information processing, threatens that cultural identity by weakening the nation-state concept on which world order and international institutional structures are founded. This is especially apparent in Canada, where the cultural heritage of the Quebec French Canadians is being bombarded by noncultural information. The technology of the information delivery system is most highly developed over the North American continent, and the resources of the program production industry in the United States are overwhelmingly greater than Canadian resources. Canada and other concerned nations in today's communication environment must respond by redoubling efforts toward creating environments that allow national culture to flourish. The International Institute of Communications, whose members come from both developed and developing countries, is excellently structured to provide a forum for dealing with the growing pains that result from this second information revolution. (RL)

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The Information "Revolution":

Information, Communications and Culture

A Background Paper

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The Information "Revolution":

Information, Communications and Culture

The history of Western civilization probably has recorded no more profound events than those set in train by the disintegration of the Byzantine Empire in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Empires had fallen before, and others have fallen since; and when they fell the elements of their civilization, their social and political structures, passed with them. But when the Turks finally destroyed Constantinople in 1453, they unleashed forces which shaped the destiny of Europe, released men's minds from the shackles of medieval scholasticism, fostered the Renaissance, created the concept of the nation-state, led to the development of modern political structures, and culminated in the emergence of meticulous study of natural phenomena, the development of rigorous scientific method.

The fruits of Byzantine scholarship, with its origins in the Greece of Plato and Aristotle, could spread throughout the Western world because of that most significant of events, the invention of the printing press. But these were turbulent years, and the fruits of that earlier Information Revolution took centuries to ripen. Constantinople fell at a time when the authority of the Western Church was beseiged and crumbling, social and political order were at the mercy of warring kings, dukes and Popes, and economic structures and relationships had been destroyed by the Black Death. Dynastic wars gave way to nationalistic wars, and nationalistic wars gave way to civil wars. Europe was laid waste in great wars of religion,

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while the beginnings of the overseas empires were accompanied by the destruction of native peoples and their cultures. Economic domination went hand in hand with subjugation and "conversion" of the heathen. The battle became a battle for men's minds as well as for material wealth.

Our Western cultural heritage today stems from the information revolution of the fifteenth century. The printing press had been the means, the medium of communications, whereby the legacy of Byzantium was disseminated throughout the Western world, and when the wars had ended in total exhaustion and the Age of Reason had dawned, the Western world had changed forever. The international community of nation-states, built on the concept of sovereignty, represented an inherently stable institutional structure within which economic development could take place in a comparatively orderly manner. The Industrial Revolution followed, and today even the least developed of the world's developing countries seeks to conform to this pattern. Using the information flowing from the more developed nations, using modern means of communications, these newer members of the community of nations hasten to improve their economic foundations while developing, strengthening and preserving their cultural identities.

But today we talk of a new Information Revolution. Messages passing with the speed of light, high-speed computers processing data and producing information, communications media of every kind ensuring that knowledge is universally shared, are the hallmarks of this new revolution. But knowledge is power, and the control of information is power. The fortune of the Rothschilds was built on the wings of a carrier pigeon. The strength

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of the multinational corporation is built on information flows and the decisions that are based upon them. The world fleets of mammoth oil tankers are directed and controlled from day to day by the planning and allocation software residing in centralized computing operations in one country. Arrangements such as these contribute immeasurably to the process of maximizing wealth. But they pose grave threats to the economic sovereignty of the nation-state, be the country integrated into a regional political-economic group or be it outside any such formal association, as is Canada's situation.

The communications media of today work with terrifying speed. The Information Revolution that transformed the world from a medieval society to today's community of nations encompassed centuries; the new information revolution is far from leisurely. The world today is not the world of twenty years ago, and the world in ten years hence will look, I predict, very different from the world we live in now. Information flows will change our economic structures and the location of corporate and economic power. They will change the composition of the goods and services traded on national and international markets. They will change the nature of the skills required by the employed labour force. They will change the structure, ownership and control of industry, including, most significantly, the ownership and control of the communications media themselves.

The Information Revolution of today has now become a commonplace concept, albeit an uncomfortable one. We must develop policies to meet the political imperatives of the Information Economy. We fret about the implications of the Information Society with respect to youth, leisure, employment, and culture.

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We are ambivalent. We are afraid lest we should not be at the leading edge of the revolution, and yet we are afraid of what will happen to us if we are. We know that our comfortably familiar institutions will be changed, either by the force of events or by ourselves. But if we are to change them, we can not always see clearly what future form they should take. We do not live in comfortable times.

My own country's close proximity and strong economic ties with the United States make it particularly vulnerable in economic terms to the erosion of sovereignty. However, important though it is, economic sovereignty is not my principal concern today. I want rather to discuss the impact of the information revolution, with its great speed, on the culture of our societies.

The "modernization" process, which has already led to acceptance of instant potatoes, homogenized milk and junk foods, is now leading us to an era of instant electronic contact, homogenized culture, and junk television programs. The new communications media provide the perfect means for breaking down the barriers of time and distance which, until relatively recently, have provided natural protection for a community's culture. But culture, in its broad sense, is the very essence of a nation. It is what gives it individuality - what sets it apart from the rest of the world. It is the arts, certainly - music, painting, sculpture, poetry, books and plays - but it is also history, language, education and recreation. It is the basis on which individuals establish their values and develop their individual goals. Today's communications enable us to share these things and thus enrich our lives. But they also threaten to destroy what may be particularly fragile.

I have argued in my writings that governments in a free democratic society have a responsibility for cultural development, which is defined as both a goal and a process. A society must be able to create its own life, and the government must not only provide the necessary environmental stability, but also ensure that the forces of change can work constructively, critically and dynamically. Culture must have freedom and room to grow, but the traditions and the essence of many cultures, including that of Canada, deny the right or responsibility of government to direct, control or manipulate either the culture itself or its development.

This is a fine line to draw, and one to which we in Canada are particularly sensitive. All the world knows that within Canada French Canadians have maintained a separate cultural identity through two hundred years of change, and throughout that period conscious policies have been pursued by the institutions of the collectivity - the Roman Catholic Church, the provincial government of Quebec - to protect and preserve the cultural identity against the threat of assimilation. The emphasis of these policies has always lain in the field of communications - the flow of information. English-speaking Canada today has also looked to policies in the field of communications as one of its defences against the ever-perceived threat of extinction of its cultural identity. Our Broadcasting Act and the elements of our tax structure as it relates to advertising expenditures in foreign media have been two of the major policy instruments in recent years by which Canada has sought to provide both channels of opportunity and financial resources for Canadian cultural expression. Educational texts and educational broadcasting via satellite have been used by provincial authorities as constructive contributions to cultural development.

But today's technology in the field of communications would appear to make such measures less than adequate. The advent first of cable distribution of distant (i.e., imported) TV signals, and now the existence of satellite distribution of such signals, with the direct-broadcast satellite not far away, brings into almost every Canadian home the product of the cultures of other countries. Our TV fare today comes predominantly from Hollywood. Some twenty-eight years ago, before the television set had replaced the kitchen table as the focus of Canadian family life, it was said that the Canadian child already knew more about the significance of the Fourth of July than of the First of July, Canada's national day. Today, the political and social manifestations of the American constitutional and legal system are constantly reflected in Canadian commentary, and are affecting the development of our political and social structure. The standards of taste dictated by commercial concerns contribute to the spread of these forces for change in French Canada also, as young French Canadians enjoy much of the English-language programming available over today's delivery systems.

Today's communications systems and technology, in sum, facilitate the erosion of cultural differences and might be seen as a threat to cultural sovereignty. The first Information Revolution created and nurtured the concept of the nation-state with its unique cultural identity. The technology of the second Information Revolution may be threatening that cultural identity and thus weakening the nation-state concept on which our world order and international institutional structures are founded.

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The response to this situation on the part of governments, and not only in Canada, has to date been far from clear. In the traditions of freedom of information which most countries have fought to preserve, restraints upon the international flow of information would be repugnant. But Canada's vulnerability is perhaps greater, at the present time, than that of almost any other country in the world. The technology of the delivery system is most highly developed over the North American continent, and the resources of the program production industry in the United States are overwhelmingly greater than our own. Canada's response, of course, must include a redoubling of its efforts to create a national environment in which national culture can continue to develop, flourish and prosper. But is this enough?

Canada's political history has included, from the time of the foundation of the old League of Nations, a strong reliance on international institutions to help resolve problems arising from inequalities of size. Other middle and small nations have come to share Canada's view of the importance of such institutions in this regard. My work with the ITU and UNESCO, our work with the OECD in Paris, has confirmed for me the reliance which must be placed upon joint action to meet common concerns. My discussions with delegates at international conferences, and my personal conversations with individuals in many parts of the world, have also told me that the threat to national culture posed by the new Information Revolution is a matter of grave concern in many other countries. It is clearly time that these threats should be considered openly and evaluated dispassionately if we are to reach acceptable conclusions.

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At this point I would like to ask what should be the proper role on this issue for the International Institute of Communications. Until the present, the IIC has been examining questions about the working of new telecommunications systems and services, and looking at the opportunities and challenges of satellite and cable technologies. Copyright laws, freedom of the media, the role of government vis-à-vis the media, the role of the broadcaster in educational programming, are all questions already on our plates. We can continue to meet annually, discuss these matters, identify priorities, and carry out studies. Since the "We" consists of engineers, industrialists, journalists, broadcasters and policy-makers, coming from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, we can each contribute from our own perspectives and be, in turn, enriched by the contributions of others. We can return refreshed, and even further enlightened, to our labours at the end of the conference.

But, ten years hence, will we be able to look back and say that anything has been achieved as a result of our deliberations in 1979? I think we must dwell on this question for a moment. The fact that the "Information Society" is a priority theme this year is certainly a good start. As you know, there is a number of international governmental organizations charged with responsibility for looking into issues and problems in the field of communications. In the technical arena we see the ITU, which is responsible for the orderly use of the spectrum and telecommunications systems by the international community of nations. The OECD is the forum in which many developed countries coordinate policies related to economic aspects of communications. UNESCO is concerned with cultural policies - its McBride Commission will report on many aspects of the Information Revolution before

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too long. Bodies such as these approach their tasks with the object of arriving at clear policy prescriptions which governments are supposed to follow. But what is the proper role of the IIC? The IIC is a prestigious body and enjoys widespread support. What contribution, in turn, will it make to development of communications in society?

The IIC is a non-governmental organization, but it includes among its members policy-makers and many other influential people from both developed and developing countries, and people from both the public and the private sectors. It is excellently structured to provide us with an objective overview of questions of the hour, including policy questions. It can play a sensitizing, catalytic role. We are currently hearing a great deal of talk about the Information Revolution, and being suitably sensitized as to its implications. But what are countries going to do about these implications? The costs of action might be horrendous. How will countries finance such policies as might be necessary? Do we need major new international initiatives, agreements or treaties? We should know not only what we ought to do, but also what we can do. These are matters of deep concern as our technology carries us forward into the new Information Society, and we do not have the answers.

The problems that face us are complex, and we know that finding those answers will be far from easy. Our knowledge of the facts is deficient, and our analytical processes suffer from the inadequacy of the immediate past as a guide to the future. In many aspects of this area of

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great sensitivity a highly judgmental approach is necessary, and acceptance of the conclusions of any particular piece of analysis may be far from unanimous. Formulating the questions might be easy; finding the answers promises to be a task of great difficulty.

I have raised in my remarks some profound issues. I have suggested to you that the first Information Revolution changed the world, and I have further suggested to you that the new Information Revolution, based on the new technologies for which we, collectively, bear responsibility, threatens to change, at breakneck speed, the world society we have so painfully built. There are fundamental policy issues here. Perhaps they bring into conflict some of our deepest principles - principles of high moral value in our common cultural heritage. I have indicated that these questions are urgent. I would like to ask, now, whether this body is prepared to accept some responsibility for considering these questions, and whether, having considered them, it is prepared to suggest, for the consideration of governments, such courses of action that might seem best to meet the threats - and the opportunities - of the new Information Revolution. We cannot know the results of such studies in advance, it is true. But that is no reason not to seek to avoid errors which, in human and social terms, could be very costly. I believe that the IIC today has an opportunity to contribute in some measure to the future well-being of all our peoples by its readiness to look a little more deeply into the problems of the second Information Revolution.